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Polling shows alarming gaps in social distancing, PPE and cleaning protocols in the workplace

One in five workers are reporting that they do not have appropriate social distancing protocols in the workplace.

Like with our public health measures it is important that our work health and safety (WHS) measures apply the highest, and most effective, set of controls to ensure workers' exposure to COVID-19 is reduced to the lowest level possible. This 'hierarchy of controls' ensures that businesses apply a range of measures that are practical for their work with a particular focus on measures such as physical distancing.

The public health measures currently in force around Australia ensure that the public maintain appropriate physical distancing, however, this is not the case for many workplaces, where workers are expected to work in close proximity with each other. In many of these workplaces it is possible, and indeed practical, for better physical distancing to be applied. Our WHS laws need to ensure this is achievable for more workers.

These results suggest many Australian's are being placed at risk of contracting Covid-19 in the course of their work and that many workplaces, without direction to apply the hierarchy of control, have not adequately addressed the risk of Covid-19.

Social distancing, PPE and proper cleaning are essential measures to keep working people safe and healthy during this crisis, but many workers, and especially those in insecure work, do not have the support they need.

Young workers and those on the lowest incomes are also the most likely to report that their workplaces have not implemented proper social distancing – 29 per cent of 18-35 year old and 47 per cent of those earning less than \$15,600.

In addition, 43 per cent of Australian workers who need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to keep them safe from COVID-19 in their workplace do not have it according to the research conducted for the ACTU.

The biggest shortfalls in PPE are for workers on fixed-term contracts (63 per cent) and casuals. 58 per cent of casual workers who have been in their job for less than 12 months do not have the PPE they need, and those with more than 12 months in their job fare only slightly better - 51 per cent of those workers are missing equipment.

Insecure workers are also more likely to not have proper cleaning protocols in their workplace. The data shows this is a problem for 35 per cent of casuals in their job for less than a year and 33 per cent of gig economy workers.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

“Employers always have a responsibility to provide safe work for working people and applying the most effective controls possible to prevent workers contracting COVID-19. This crisis is again highlighting gaps in the workplace safety arrangements in many businesses.

“Social distancing, PPE and cleaning protocols are not just essential in our health care system, every workplace needs to ensure that workers are safe and have access to every possible safety strategy.

“Concerningly this data shows that PPE is being provided to just over half the workers who need it. This is a massive shortfall at this stage of the crisis and needs to be urgently addressed.

“Casuals and contract workers are even less likely to have the protective equipment they need as well as being less likely to have social distancing protocols which shows how insecure work makes it harder for people to speak up in the workplace.

“There is a clear role for the Morrison Government here, more needs to be done from the Federal level to ensure that working people are as safe as possible during this pandemic.”

ENDS

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